

Specifying a target population: The case of the Malaysian public relations practitioners

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A very important concern in conducting survey research is the specification of a given population or the identification of a target population. Such a specification permits sampling which then allows findings of the sample to be extrapolated. However, it is not always possible for a researcher to have a complete sampling frame at his disposal. Pragmatism dictates the acceptance of a near complete and up-to-date sampling frame to be better than no sampling frame at all. The researcher must be aware of the bias, the sampling error and response error from such an incomplete sampling frame.

Studies differ along the continuum; one of having a complete, up-to-date sampling frame to the other end of the continuum where the sampling frame is not in existence. Researchers do not always deal with problems that have a clear sampling frame as often times they have to conduct research on difficult, unclear or hidden populations. A study to determine the number of prostitutes infected with HIV-1 used samples of convenience when the researchers could not determine the entire population of prostitutes (Berry, Duan, and Kenouse 1989). A study on drug addicts is yet another example when researchers found it was not possible to obtain a sampling frame of drug addicts. A scholar called the population of drug-users that was studied as *hidden* (Van Meter 1990). These are but instances of population that are not "easy" to obtain or *accessible*; hence not easy for a procedure to select a sample. Scholars therefore selected their respondents from a sample of convenience rather than from that of a sampling frame.

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Several scholars have conducted research on *difficult to interview populations* in the past. Their findings were useful in understanding the difficulties encountered.

Henderson and Butler (1990) conducted surveys on what they termed as *difficult population*; people with patterns of alcoholism among homeless and the Hip Fracture studies. In the alcoholism studies, male and female respondents were sampled from shelters and the streets of St. Louis. In the Hip Fracture study, 1200 elderly people in St. Louis that could be potentially related to falling behaviour were included as respondents.

McDonald (1990) indicated some problems and solutions in survey designing and sampling of native American population, a population that did not have a complete and up-to-date list. An approximate population was obtained.

A survey on public relations practitioners in Malaysia undertaken in late 1991 and early 1992 highlighted the problems of conducting research on a population that did not allow easily for a sampling to be conducted. In the present study, the population was problematic because of the nature of public relations itself as well as the absence of a complete list of practitioners. The population of public relations practitioners was situated in between the continuum of a non-existent sampling frame and that in which there was a complete and an up-to-date sampling frame.

In Malaysia as well as in many other countries, it is possible for anyone to enter (and leave) public relations. This makes any list available on public relations practitioners highly tentative. It is also not possible to have a complete list because no one knows who is (and who is not) practising public relations. Thus there hardly exists a well-defined population on public relations practitioners to make possible a sample to be made of a target population.

A study becomes meaningful for purposes of inference if there is a defined population. One can then make a sample and from then make inferences on the population. If the population is small, there is no need for a sample to be done as all the elements in the population will be included in the census. The message is therefore clear. There is a vital need to identify a population.

Scholars studying voting behavior have an advantage in that they have a list of voters registered with the Malaysian Election Commission. Selection from the sampling frame makes possible inferences on the population of voters.

The 1992 survey on public relations practitioners was a follow-up of the study conducted in 1977 to enable collection of up-to-date information about the present status of the practitioners, their socio-demographic profile, and their opinion toward certain issues. There were other studies conducted on public relations practitioners in Malaysia, but they were limited in scope as they focused mainly on practitioners in the Klang Valley (Rosli Selamat 1989 and Lilly Ruth 1988).

1977 Study

In 1977 the number of public relations practitioners was small. Government ministries and the private sector were beginning to accept the importance of public

relations in their organisations. The School of Mass Communication at the MARA Institute of Technology started offering courses in public relations in 1972 and the Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1971. The Department of Communication at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was started in 1976 with public relations as one of the four sequences offered.

The Institute of Public Relations Malaysia, an association that offers membership to public relations practitioners, initially conducted short-term courses that enabled students to obtain certificates and diplomas. There were also private colleges that conducted courses that enabled students to obtain public relations certificates from United Kingdom. In addition to the courses on public relations offered by local educational institutions, Malaysians could obtain their diplomas and degrees in public relations abroad. All these actions by educational institutions provided the pool of qualified people to enter public relations.

When the survey was conducted in 1977 the Malaysian government had recently adopted a proposal to create the posts of public relations officers in ministries and departments to explain government policies to the people. The government made it mandatory for a person to have a basic university degree before being appointed as a government public relations officer. A scheme was drawn by the Public Services Department that enabled the officer to have a career in public relations.

When the study was started in 1977, contacts were made with the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) for a list of members. The Institute had for its members nearly all the practitioners working in the Federal capital, Kuala Lumpur or the adjacent city of Petaling Jaya. The IPRM list of membership had 316 members ranging from Life Members, Fellows, Members, Associate and Affiliate Members.

Not to be contented with the IPRM membership list as a record of all the public relations practitioners in the country, contacts were made with government ministries and departments, hotels and banks (not many then) to have more names of practitioners. A total of 336 names were obtained. Questionnaires were mailed to the practitioners with a stamped self-addressed envelope enclosed for purposes of reply. Follow up visits for in-depth interviews were made to states that had public relations practitioners such as Kedah, Penang, Perak, Selangor, Melaka, Johor, Pahang, Kelantan, Terengganu, Sabah, and Sarawak (nearly all the states in Malaysia). Such visits were made possible with financial assistance from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

The study in 1977 could only use 186 of the questionnaires. The questionnaires that could not be used were from persons who acknowledged that they were no more in public relations, their job descriptions indicated that they were not performing public relations functions while some declined to answer or their letters were returned because of wrong or incomplete addresses given (Idid 1980).

1992 Study

During the intervening years the number of public relations practitioners has increased both in the government as well as in the private sector. The policy undertaken by the government to place public relations practitioners in all ministries and government departments and the growth of big companies in line with the government's privatization and industrialization policies have been instrumental in influencing the development of public relations in Malaysia.

Acknowledging the development of public relations in the country, it was proposed that another study be made to obtain an up-to-date information of public relations practitioners in the country. The 1992 study obtained names of practitioners from four main sources in its attempt to have a complete list of public relations practitioners in Malaysia. The first source was the membership list of IPRM that provided a total of 265 members.

The study realised that the IPRM list was incomplete as there were practitioners in the country who were not members of IPRM. A majority of government public relations practitioners were not members because of the misconception that IPRM catered only for the private sector. To obtain the list of public relations practitioners who were not members of IPRM, three different lines of action were adopted.

The first course of action was to obtain a list from the government's public service department that maintained names, designations and addresses (phone and fax numbers) of public relations practitioners who were with the federal government ministries, departments, and semi-government agencies (Employees Provident Fund, Rubber Research Institute, universities, etc). A total of 117 names were obtained. The Public Service Department, under the Prime Minister's Department, did not maintain a list of public relations practitioners employed by state governments or local authorities. For this purpose contacts were made with the respective state government agencies. From the combined list, the study obtained a total of 125 names of practitioners serving with the Federal, State, and Local governments.

The second course of action was to compile a list of practitioners serving in the commercial sector. A third list was compiled by going through the companies listed in the Directory of Companies in Malaysia. Inquiries were made as to whether these companies had public relations practitioners. If they had, their names were obtained. From this list a total of 131 names were collected.

The study had some problems with the designations of public relations practitioners in the commercial sector. The practitioners in the banking sector were normally designated as promotions and public relations officers, in others as public relations executives or communication managers (executives). We decided to accept these designations to be included as our respondents. We rejected those in the commercial sector who were personnel managers or marketing managers (executives) that included public relations as one of their functions.

Before the survey began students in the Department of Communications went through the past two years of newspapers in Malaysia and recorded any mention of public relations practitioners. The practitioners were normally used as sources

of news items or were announced when taking their appointments. The names of practitioners mentioned in the newspapers were checked so that they would not be listed again if their names were mentioned in the IPRM list, the government or the commercial sector list. Care was taken to verify that the practitioners were still with the company as the announcements in the newspapers could be dated. The names were checked with the government and the commercial lists so as to avoid duplication. The names obtained from the newspapers were included with the government and commercial sector list.

The four sources obtained a total collection of 521 names of public relations practitioners in the country. For the purpose of this study, two lists would be discussed, namely the IPRM list and the second list combining the names in the government and commercial sectors.

Sending the questionnaire

As the study was budget-constrained and acknowledging that the practitioners were spread throughout the cities of Kuala Lumpur-Petaling Jaya and the other states, it was decided to conduct the survey by using the mail. In the 1977 survey a similar method was used (including several visits to various states).

A self-addressed stamped envelope was enclosed for respondents to reply. In the envelope was a questionnaire and a letter personally signed by the project director and the two assistants in which the nature of the study was explained. The letter sought their cooperation. The IPRM was officially kept informed of the study even before the questionnaires were sent out.

The first wave of letters containing the questionnaire was sent out in late November, 1991. By early January there were 174 replies that consisted of 129 considered as acceptables. There were five refusals and the 40 letters returned were regarded as *unlocatables*. The response rate was 33.4%.

A first reminder was sent in late January asking respondents to return the questionnaire. By the end of February, the response rate increased to 43.8%.

A second reminder was sent out in early March to those who had not replied. A total of 321 replies were received by early April 1992. The response rate increased to 61.6%.

In late April another letter was sent out with a clear indication that it was a final appeal. Mention was made of the importance of the study and that cooperation was indeed sought after. The final letter had one added category of reply. In previous two reminders the three categories were (a) I am returning your questionnaire (b) I am no more in public relations (c) I have returned your questionnaire. In the final appeal another category was included namely (d) I wish to be excluded from participating in your study this time. It was later found that the last category of answer had not much of an effect. The total replies received was 355.

Response

By 16 May 1992 the total response rate for the 1992 study was 68%. The study encountered methodological problems, both from the list of practitioners selected for the study and the response rate of practitioners and non-practitioners.

The IPRM list had 265 names but the survey found several members could not be included in the survey as they were no more practising public relations. Many affiliate members were not performing public relations functions as the survey required. IPRM allowed the general public and students enrolled for its courses to register as affiliate members. In fact not all Members, Fellows, and Life Members were still practising public relations and thus could not be considered as eligibles as respondents in the study. This was indicated from the 95 replies received, with some indicating that they had retired or had changed jobs, although they still maintained their membership with IPRM.

The second problem with the IPRM list was its lack of complete information in particular with the addresses of members. Members appeared to have changed their addresses without providing forwarding information. Some of the letters that were sent out by the study were returned but in some others there was no knowledge about the fate of these letters. They could be still with the addressee, kept by the new tenants or remained with the dead post office department (despite a note on the envelope indicating names and addresses of sender of letter).

Abraham (1990) mentioned three factors that accounted for the low response rate in face-to-face surveys. Nonresponse can be classified through three general categories (a) unlocatables (b) uncontactables and (c) refusals.

In mail questionnaire another category that could be added, being relevant to the present study, was the undetermined status of respondents as to whether they were public relations practitioners or not.

A brief discussion on the categories used by Abraham with reference to the present study could be helpful.

Unlocatables: To Abraham, the unlocatables were respondents that were not able to be located and be interviewed. Two types of unlocatables were identified in this study. One type were the practitioners that the study were unaware existed in the country and hence were unable to locate them. The second type of unlocatables were mainly the IPRM members who left no forwarding addresses.

The second category identified by Abraham were the uncontactables. These were respondents who were located (had the right address) but never kept their appointments for the interview, either they were suspicious of the study or their jobs kept them away during the duration of the study. The present study using the mail method could hardly accept this category of uncontactables as it was not certain whether the would-be respondents really received the letters sent or the addresses were correct. If they did not receive the letters due to wrong addresses then they were more likely to be grouped under unlocatables. Uncontactables would be more relevant in face-to-face research rather than in mail survey.

Refusals: By definition refusals were those who refused to answer the questionnaire or were unwilling to participate in the study. This study found five types

of refusals. The first type of refusals were those who replied that it was against their company's policy to respond to any study (for fear of divulging company secrets, etc). Incidentally none of the public relations practitioners in the government service resorted to providing this excuse.

The second type of refusals were those that said they lacked time, that the questionnaire was too long and some of the questions were complicated.

The third type of refusals was that they did not wish to participate. No reasons given. Period.

The fourth group of refusals took a delaying tactic. The respondents were provided with a questionnaire in the first letter. During the second wave when they were contacted, they indicated that they had not received the questionnaire. The study sent them another questionnaire and weeks later when they were contacted by phone, they said they had not received it. Another questionnaire was then sent. Again no questionnaire was returned. One would-be respondent of this refusal-type was sent four questionnaires at the addresses she had specified. Again no reply.

The fifth refusal type gave the excuse that they had been subjected to too many surveys. These surveys were mainly conducted by students on various issues pertaining to public relations.

Results

By 16 May 1992 we had with us 355 replies from persons who had replied. The breakdown was 228 responses from the IPRM list and 127 from the second list. Some of the questionnaires could not be used as the respondents were not designated or performed public relations functions (personnel managers,nurses, welfare officers). Others had written in to say they were no more in public relations (left public relations or had completely retired).

The total response were as follows.

Total number of individuals that were sent out questionnaires t totalled 521.

Sent out

IPRM List	Govt. and Commercial List	Total
265	256	521

Received:

	IPRM List	Govt and Commercial List	Total
First wave:			
Accepted	41	88	129
Unlocatables	30	-	30
Refusals	4	1	5
Ineligibles	10	-	10

Second wave			
Accepted	10	8	18
Unlocatables	13	-	13
Ineligibles	23	-	23
Third wave			
Accepted	9	15	24
Unlocatables	6	-	6
Refusals	8	5	13
Ineligibles	48	2	50
Fourth Wave:			
Accepted	9	8	17
Unlocatables	3	-	3
Refusals	-	-	-
Ineligibles	14	-	14
Total:			
Accepted	69	119	188
Unlocatables	52	-	52
Refusals	12	6	18
Ineligibles	95	2	97
 Questionnaires Accepted Ineligibles/Refusals/unlocatables No Response			
 188 (36.1%) 167 (32%) 166 (31.9%)			

Discussion

A total of 521 names were identified for this study from four main sources. Two lists were created, one from the IPRM list that had 265 names and the combined list of government and the commercial sectors that had 256 names. The total number of replies accepted for this study of practising practitioners was 188 (36%); while 167 replies were rejected, refused or were not located (32%). The non-response number was 166 (31.9%). The response rate was 68%

The returns of the mailed questionnaire indicated several characteristics. In the IPRM list, non-eligibles were likely to reply later, for example, a total of 10 replied in the first wave, followed by 23 in the second wave and 48 in the third wave. On the other hand, the eligibles in the IPRM list were likely to answer earlier. Hence there were 41 that replied in the first wave, 10 in the second wave, and nine each in the third and fourth wave. It was similar for the eligibles in the non-IPRM list. Those eligibles replied early. A total of 88 respondents replied in the first wave which was equivalent to 74% of those eligibles from the non-IPRM list. If anything that could be said, it was that in the first and second wave 78%

of the eligibles from both the lists had already replied to the study.

The study found a greater response from the IPRM list than from the second list. A total of 86% responded (including the unlocatables) from the IPRM list while the response from the second list was only 49.6%. In terms of eligibility, there were more respondents accepted from the second list (119) than from the IPRM list (69).

There were more unlocatables in the IPRM list than the other list. In a future study, it was necessary to confirm the list for clarity and accuracy of addresses before questionnaires could be sent out. The list provided by the Public Services Department and the commercial sector was recently up-dated and posed little problem.

Studies dealing with unclear population will require researchers to think of ways and means to obtain a list as complete as possible. This paper has indicated steps taken to deal with an unclear population of public relations practitioners in Malaysia. Despite the steps taken, there were problems of respondent locatability and eligibility. In future studies, researchers may wish to write to all in the list to probe the unlocatables and the ineligible before beginning a proper study. The present study indicates that the ineligible were likely to return the questionnaire later (in the second and third wave) compared to eligibles who were more likely to reply in the first wave. When another study is conducted several years from now it will have to specify a target population and a clearer action on what to take based on the experiences of the present study.

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